

Julia May Carson

1938–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM INDIANA

1997–



Image courtesy of the Member

OVERCOMING POVERTY AND RACISM, Julia Carson served nearly two decades in the Indiana legislature and in Indianapolis administrative office before winning election to the U.S. House in 1996. Representative Carson, the first African American and woman to represent the Indiana state capital, has focused on issues affecting working-class Americans.

Julia May Porter was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on July 8, 1938. Her mother, Velma Porter, was single and moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, to find work as a domestic. Julia Porter grew up working a series of part-time jobs before her 1955 graduation from Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis. Shortly thereafter, she was married, raised two children, and subsequently divorced. She later studied at Martin University and Indiana University. In 1965 she was working as a secretary at a United Auto Workers local chapter when newly elected Indiana Congressman Andy Jacobs hired her as a caseworker and district aide. She worked for Jacobs until 1972, when he encouraged her to run for office in the Indiana legislature. From 1973 to 1977, Carson served in the state house of representatives before winning election to the Indiana senate. She served in the upper chamber until 1990, sitting on its finance committee and eventually holding the minority whip position. Throughout her state legislature service, Carson was employed as the human resources director at an engine company, a job she held from 1973 to 1996. In 1991, Carson won election as a Center Township Trustee. In that post, she administered welfare payments in central Indianapolis and was successful at erasing the agency's crippling debt—a \$20 million deficit—leaving \$7 million in the bank prior to winning a seat in Congress.

When Representative Jacobs retired in 1996, Carson won his endorsement and entered the Democratic primary for the open seat. The district encompassed the state capital of Indianapolis, a traditionally moderate political district that was 68 percent white and 30 percent black. In the Democratic primary she topped the

former district party chair, with a margin of 49 to 31 percent. In the general election campaign against Republican Virginia Blackenbaker, who shared Carson's liberal support for abortion rights and opposition to the death penalty, Carson prevailed with 53 percent. In her subsequent four re-election campaigns, Carson has won by slightly larger margins in her competitive district. Reapportionment in 2001 added more than 100,000 constituents, many of them Republican. Nevertheless, Carson was re-elected in 2004 to her fifth consecutive term, defeating Republican Andrew Horning, 54 to 44 percent.¹

Carson, who underwent heart surgery shortly after her election, was sworn in to office from her hospital bed on January 9, 1997. When Carson recuperated and claimed her seat in the 105th Congress (1997–1999) in March 1997, she received posts on two panels: the Banking and Financial Services Committee (later renamed Financial Services) and the Veterans' Affairs Committee. In the 108th Congress (2003–2005) she left Veterans' Affairs to accept assignment on the powerful Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. In the 108th Congress, she had risen to become the third-ranking member on Financial Services' Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity.

Carson's legislative interests ranged from national issues affecting children and working Americans to local programs that affected her Indianapolis constituency. In the 108th Congress, she sponsored the largest Amtrak reauthorization bill in history. The National Defense Rail Act provided for the development of new rail lines including high-speed rail corridors. Amtrak's largest repair facility is located near Indianapolis. Carson also supported placing restrictions on the North American Free Trade Agreement, arguing that it has taken low-wage manufacturing jobs some of which are in her district.² Carson has also worked to bring about greater use of ethanol as a fuel to decrease pollution and U.S. dependence on foreign oil. She also co-chairs the Zoo Caucus.

From her seat on the Financial Services Committee, Carson has authored legislation to reform the debt consolidation industry. In order to increase the "financial literacy" of average Americans, she has helped create the Indiana Mortgage and Foreclosure Hotline to counsel homeowners and potential buyers on the mortgage process.³ Carson supported measures to curb smoking among minorities and to promote child safety features on guns.⁴ She also has been an advocate for moderating cuts to the welfare system, noting that a social safety net "can work if we are committed to weeding out excessiveness, abuse and apathy."⁵ One of her crowning legislative achievements came during the 106th Congress (1999–2001), when Congresswoman Carson authored and introduced a bill, signed by President William J. Clinton, conferring the Congressional Gold Medal to civil rights activist Rosa Parks.⁶

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Julia May Carson,"
<http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,"
<http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.

2 *Politics in America*, 2004
(Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 373–374.

3 "Official Biography of Julia Carson,"
<http://juliacarson.house.gov/display2.cfm?idff778&typeffNews>
(accessed 14 June 2002).

4 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women*:
(Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 52.

5 "Julia Carson," *Contemporary Black Biography* 23 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1999).

6 For a history and full list of Congressional Gold Medal Recipients, see
http://clerk.house.gov/histHigh/Congressional_History/goldMedal.html.